

The Athenian Mercury:

Saturday, March 10. 1694.

Quest. 1.

MY Entrance on Religion was as sweet and comfortable as I cou'd desire, but by a wretched Carelessness I have fall'n by degrees totally in the space of three Years, and in these four next following Years I neither have nor can continue in any Thought, Desire or Power to Repent, but live a Moral honest Life, love Justice in all my Dealings, follow Peace and Civility with all Men, live in good Credit and Esteem amongst my Neighbours; I frequently use the Church, I am not inclined to Company, nor any Vice that I can find by Examination; yet after all I retain no spark of Love to God, or Sense of the Divine Being, but Heaven, Hell, Judgment and Torment, make no more Impression on my Mind when they are discoursed seriously, than they can on a Block or Stone. When I remember my former Station, my Reason discovers my present Misery, but without Hope or Dread, notwithstanding my utmost Endeavour: I have implored heavenly assistance to grant me a Sincere Repentance, but can have no help in those Duties, nor any feeling desire for what I ask: I know the Comfort of a Godly Life, for I have tasted it, but see it now out of my reach, and as a thing which concerns me not, for like *Lazarus* or the Prophets Axe, I have no Power to come forth, nor Heart to beg for it. In this Grave of my Soul I have in four Years rooted from my Mind all the glorious Ideas of God's Attributes, the Value of the Soul, or being of a Future State; I retain no sensible Thoughts of them, so that I am forced to conclude that my Restoration is as impossible as for a Dead Corps to desire to live, or be troubled because it doth not.

Gentlemen, I know you will put me upon Duties, and bid me Hope, but I Conjure you as you will Answer it, that you do not deceive me by speaking Peace, where God hath and doth suffer too much, but give me your true Sentiments,

First, *Of the meaning of these Words, He that layeth his Hand to the Plow, and draweth back, my Soul shall have no Pleasure in him?*

Secondly, *If after they have been enlightened, and have tasted the Heavenly Gift and Powers of the World to come, &c.*

Thirdly, *Whether these two Scriptures be not pronounced directly against me?*

Fourthly, *Whether in my falling back I have not sinned against the Holy Ghost, or whether this drawing back be not the Sin against the Holy Ghost, it being under the same Sentence?*

Fifthly, *As there can be no way to avoid my Misery, Whether it is not better for me to continue in this insensible Stupidity, than to be hurried into a furious Despair, which must needs be the Effect of a terrifying Conscience, altho' I have no reason to believe that my Conscience will ever trouble me more in this World.*

Sixthly, *Since all means of Hearing, Reading, or Prayer, do but encrease my Distemper, Whether my Continuance in those Duties may not provoke a just God to drive me from this state of Deadness to a horrible Desperation, for it is most certain that such cold dead Performances are abominable in his sight?*

Seventhly, *Would you advise me to forsake the Church, and frequent Dissenters, will God grant that in one place which he utterly refuseth in another?*

Eighthly, *Hath there ever been the Example of any Person in my Condition for so long a time, that the Holy Spirit hath ever assisted to a true Repentance?*

Ans. A dreadful Instance of the Effects of Remissness in Religious Duties, and the Service of God, which may be of good use to those who are not yet sunk so deep as the present Querist, who is indeed, in a sad and dan-

gerous, tho' not, we hope, desperate Condition, and who needs the Prayers of all good-Christians, whose Questions we shall first endeavour to Answer, and then give him our farther Advice. The first Question joyns two Scriptures together, 9 St. Luk. last. *He that putteth his Hand to the Plough and looketh back, is not fit for the Kingdom of God*; and that in Heb. 10. 38. *If any Man draw back, my Soul shall have no pleasure in him*. For the former of these Dr. Hammond gives us the meaning very fully in his Paraphrase, "He that holds the Plough must have his Eye diligently fasten'd upon it, and if he be apt often to look back, he will be unfit for that Employment; so thou when thou hast undertaken my Service, must follow it with the same Diligence, and if thou hast any Thoughts of what thou hast left at home, thou wilt never be a fit Disciple of mine: Now tho' it must be granted that there's some Resemblance between forsaking the Service of Christ while he was here upon Earth, and growing remiss in the Offices of that Religion he has left us, now he's gone to Heaven, and therefore this Text may be well apply'd to awaken those who are in Danger of doing so; yet it's plain that there's a great Difference between the two Cases.—Besides, being fit for the Kingdom of God, seems here to relate to the Office of Preaching, if we consult the Context: Go thou says our Saviour, to such another, and Preach [the Kingdom of God] as indeed most of the Disciples personally call'd by our Saviour, seem design'd for that Office; which if they did not thoroughly Espouse, and forsake all for their Masters Service, but kept any Reserve behind, halting between God and Mammon, he says, they were not fit for his Business. Tho' it follows not, but they might afterward be, if they return'd, and kept their minds more steddily on their Work, than they had formerly done.

As for the other Scripture: "If any man draw back, my Soul shall have no Pleasure in him, the former part of the Verse, "The Just shall live by his Faith; and other places of the Context. "Forsaking the Assembly of the Saints, &c. Do seem sufficiently to clear the Sense thereof: and that it relates, as Dr. Hammond Notes, to an open total Apostacy from the Faith in time of Persecution. The true Notion, says he, of the Words is this, "If he that shou'd live by his Faith shall Cowardly withdraw himself from the Publick Worship of Christ, as Ignatius, from the Eucharist, and Prayer, God's Soul hath no Pleasure in him, he's utterly dislik'd by God. But neither do's this Scripture, tho' also a warning to all those who without any just and sufficient Cause forsake a true Church, neither does this reach the present Case, there being so wide a difference between 'em, that there's no need particularly to observe it. But tho' it were the same Case, this thwarting only takes place on those who Apostatize finally, without Repentance; tho' it was indeed mistaken by the Novatians in the Primitive Church, as well as other passages in this same Epistle: as if it extended to all that had deny'd the Faith after they were Baptiz'd; but this Opinion was so contrary to the Judgment of the Universal Church, that made it a Heresie.

For the Second Question, concerning the Third Scripture: *It is impossible, &c.* This was indeed the main place urg'd by those foremention'd Hereticks: But however thus much is plain, that it speaks of an open avow'd Apostacy from, and denial of the Christian Faith, by those who had been enlightn'd, baptiz'd, and receiv'd the Holy Ghost, the Power of working Miracles; 'Twas impossible, very difficult, as the Word is frequently taken, or Illegal, contrary to the Custom of the Church of God, to renew them again to Repentance, to admit 'em to Absolution, and the Prayers of the Church, difficult ever to restore,

store them, even upon Repentance, impossible without, unusual either ways. But neither is it of *remissness* in Faith, or a good Life, but as before absolutely falling off from both, if not also *Persecuting* the true Christian, at least joyning with those who did so, which seems imply'd in those Expressions, and trampling under foot the Blood of the Son of God, and doing despite to the Spirit of Grace.

To the third Question, Whether those Scriptures ben't pronounced directly against the Querist? By which he means, whether they don't directly reach his Case and Circumstances? Our Opinion will be plain from what has been said, that they do not. And the fourth must also be resolv'd in the same manner. For this further Reason, besides what has been already said, Because tho' we all of us, more or less, Sin against the Holy Spirit of God, who is said (after the manner of Men) to be griev'd at our Follies, yet whoever has really committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost, mentioned in the Scriptures, if now possible to be committed, they can have no Remorse for it, no Desire of Repentance, since every such Desire must be produc'd in us by that Blessed Spirit, but must be given up and left, either to a perfect dead Stupidity, or the most furious Despair. But in the present Case, it's plain that the Querist has still some Sense of his ill Condition, and some Desires, tho' those perhaps too faint, and languid, after a real Repentance.

To the fifth, Since there may be Ways to avoid his Misery (and what these are, we shall anon see further) he ought neither to continue in Stupidity, but Strengthen what remains and is ready to dye, nor yet run into the contrary extrem, of Despair, the highest affront to his Saviours Goodness, since there's yet some hope left for him, if he stays not till the Door is shut against him.

To the sixth, Whether he ought not to neglect all Duties, because such a cold and unworthy Performance of 'em does but the more provoke God? We reply in the Negative, that he ought not to neglect what's his known Duty in all Cases, because he has in some. That he ought to perform other Duties, but not neglect such as are common to all Christians. That he may have help with 'em, but cannot without 'em. That 'tis a Temptation of the Devil, which puts such Thoughts into his Heart, to hinder him from Repentance, which is not to be expected out of that Way that's appointed by God, that his Example may still be useful to others. And lastly, that he rather ought to use all possible endeavours that he may Profit by Religious Duties, than quite neglect 'em because he thinks he gets no Profit by 'em.

To the seventh, Whether we'd advise him to forsake the Church, &c. We ask for what Reason. Is it because he Profits not under it, but that he owns is his own Fault, and that it has been otherwise, or that God will give that in one place, as he says, which he denies in another. But Balaam did not find it so, nor is that Wise and Just Being whom we adore, so Capricious and Fanciful as Men are (He's not like Man, that he shou'd Lie or Repent) his Actions are ordered by the highest Equity and Reason. If you do well you shall be accepted, and none that we know of (in England) have yet publicly said, what're they may think, that Gods Spirit has left the Church of England, and if he has not, we know no Reason why you shou'd leave her, and add one Sin more to those you are already guilty of.

To the eighth, David is generally thought to have lain a considerable while, insensible of his Guilt, tho' much higher than yours, namely open scandalous Immorality. But if none that you or we know of, have recover'd out of such a Condition as you now are in, the more Reason have you to make haste out of Sodom, before it be too late, that you ben't partaker of worse Plagues than they ever suffer'd.

Now for our advice; which upon the whole, in short, is this, you are afraid of being put upon Duties, when there's no other way but that for solid Peace, for your Recovery or Salvation, which is plain even by your own confession, that 'twas by Carelessness, and Neglect in your Duty, that you came be thus. The same steps therefore you must tread backward, that have brought you so near Ruin, that is, use the direct contrary Method to

what you took when you lost your first Sense of Religion. Be constant earnest and attentive in Prayer, hearing Gods word, the Sacraments (the last when a little farther recovered.) But how shall you bring your mind to this, when a contrary Habit so firmly rooted? We answer, you may do much towards it; Keep your mind at least, close to the outward action. But in order to breaking in an inveterate Habit, act vigorously and immediately, directly against it. Fast and Humble your self in good earnest before God, Withdraw once or twice a Week (especially now) from worldly Business (you've none sure of greater Concern than your Salvation;) There think closely, on the wonderful, infinite, abus'd Love of your Saviour, who won't break the bruised Reed; who at whatsoever time a Sinner repents will have Mercy on him, who may yet give you Grace to do so, if you neglect not the means. Lastly, Frequent constantly (as before) the publick Service (not omitting your private Devotions) your self praying and desiring all other good Christians to do the same for you: From hardness of Heart, and contempt of thy Word and Commandments, Good Lord deliver us.

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